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C O N F I D E N T I A L KYIV 002172

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STATE FOR EUR/UMB

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/29/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EINV](#) [RS](#) [UP](#)
SUBJECT: UKRAINE: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH CRIMEA'S POLITICAL
LEADERS

REF: A. KYIV 1947
[1](#)B. 2007 KYIV 3101

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Taylor
for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Ambassador, along with a small American business delegation, traveled to Crimea October 19-20 for an annual investment forum. The Ambassador also met with Crimea's political leadership while there. Local leaders characterized the September 19 vote by the Crimean Rada (parliament) urging Kyiv to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a moderate step that carried no real consequences. Crimean officials complained of a lack of GOU interest in Crimea's problems and a lack of communication with Kyiv on issues like NATO membership and issues of concern to the Crimean Tatar community. President Yushchenko's representative to Crimea made a strong argument for a more tolerant GOU position toward the use of the Russian language in Crimea and for a TV station that could provide objective news in Russian. Crimean Tatar leaders lamented that there had been no real progress on issues of importance to their community and asked the Ambassador to help engage GOU officials. The Ambassador's visit helped enlarge USG visibility in Crimea and expanded our dialogue with Crimean leaders. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The Ambassador traveled to Yalta, Crimea October 19-20 to participate in an annual investment promotion forum held by the Crimean authorities. Emboffs, President of the American Chamber of Commerce in Ukraine Jorge Zukoski, and representatives from American firms Microsoft, 3M, and IMTC accompanied. The Ambassador also conducted interviews with popular Crimean TV station Chernamorka and with a Tatar community station Radio Maidan.

[1](#)3. (U) While in Yalta, the Ambassador met privately with Anatoliy Hrytsenko, Speaker of the Crimean Rada, Viktor Plakida, Crimean Prime Minister, and Leonid Zhunko, Representative of the Ukrainian President to Crimea. The Ambassador also met in Simferopol with Tatar Mejlis Chairman Mustafa Jemilev and Deputy Chairman Refat Chubarov, the Crimean Tatar community's key political leaders. The following were the main topics of discussion raised during the Ambassador's meetings.

Crimean Rada Vote on South Ossetia/Abkhazia

[1](#)4. (C) Regarding the September 19 vote by the Crimean Rada urging Kyiv to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (ref A), Hrytsenko argued that the Rada took a moderate step by not actually recognizing the breakaway regions' independence, but only requesting that the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament) closely examine the issue. Zhunko agreed that the resolution had been successfully toned down and stressed that it had no substantive implications.

15. (C) The Ambassador asked if the September 19 vote had been pushed by any external forces. Hrytsenko responded that it had been a purely domestic Crimean initiative, noting that an overwhelming majority of the Crimean people strongly supported the vote. The Ambassador asked if this public support for South Ossetia and Abkhazia meant that Crimeans, too, wanted independence. Hrytsenko ducked the question, instead saying that public opinion was driven by fears that Kyiv wanted to revoke Crimea's autonomy. Zhunko argued that the situation in Crimea was completely different than in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and said he was confident that, if a referendum were held today, a majority of Crimeans would vote to stay as part of Ukraine, not to join Russia.

Lack of Attention from Kyiv

16. (C) Hrytsenko complained throughout the meeting that the GOU did not pay appropriate attention to Crimea's legitimate needs and did not engage in serious dialogue with Crimean leadership on issues of mutual importance. He repeatedly criticized President Yushchenko and the GOU for not rebuking calls from some politicians in Kyiv to revoke Crimea's autonomous status. Hrytsenko said that GOU leadership should have come out forcefully to defend Crimea's special status and commented that Yushchenko's silence on the issue was perceived as support for calls to revoke autonomy.

17. (C) Hrytsenko pointed to the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers' efforts to appoint Crimea's police chief, "in clear violation of the Constitution," as an example of Kyiv creating ill will in Crimea. Hrytsenko also accused Kyiv of

failing to properly fund the Crimean Economic Plan, which sets funding targets for economic development programs until 2017, saying that the GOU had provided UAH 700 million (approximately USD 120 million) less than promised this year, and five times less than that provided by the previous Yanukovych government.

18. (C) Jemilev and Chubarov similarly complained of a lack of dialogue with Kyiv, in their case on issues of importance to the Crimean Tatar community. They said that under former President Kuchma there was at least a formalized dialogue, and Kuchma himself came to Crimea several times a year to participate. They said they expected President Yushchenko to expand this dialogue with Tatar leadership when he took office, but in reality the opposite occurred. Jemilev specifically asked the Ambassador to stress the importance of dialogue with the Tatar community to GOU leadership. The Ambassador said he would take this message back to Kyiv and during his interview with Radio Maidan called on the GOU, the Crimean government, and Tatar leadership to engage in a serious dialogue on Tatar-related issues.

NATO

19. (C) Hrytsenko complained that when the Presidential Secretariat organized a NATO outreach event in Simferopol in August, the Secretariat failed to coordinate with Crimean officials. Motorcades of Kyiv-based GOU participants unnecessarily disrupted traffic, he said, and there were clashes between upset Crimean residents and special police brought from Kyiv. Then, when the Crimean Rada later held open, public hearings on NATO accession, the GOU failed to send anyone.

110. (C) Zhunko called local opposition to NATO membership "artificial," although he clarified that he did not see any political interference by outside forces, including Russian government or Black Sea Fleet officials. The problem was a lack of information, said Zhunko, and radical elements were successfully appealing to fears that Ukrainian soldiers could get sucked into fighting foreign wars if Ukraine joined the Alliance.

Ties to Russia

¶11. (C) Hrytsenko described the reasons for Crimea's strong ties to Russia, noting that 58% of Crimeans identified themselves as ethnically Russian, 100% were Russian-speaking, and the roughly 600,000 retirees living in Crimea felt particularly close to Russia. He said that 92 of the 100 member Crimean Rada, while coming from a variety of parties, were united on a few core issues, namely, support for official status of the Russian language, support for closer ties with Russia, and opposition to NATO membership. Hrytsenko was quick to emphasize that he and Crimean PM Plakida were "pro-Ukrainian" and did not support any "anti-state actions," but noted that maintaining this line could be difficult in Crimea's political climate.

Russian Passports

¶12. (C) Hrytsenko said that reports of the Russians handing out passports to Crimean residents were untrue. He suggested that such rumors originated with the Kyiv political elite and cited this as another example of how provocative statements from Kyiv could have negative consequences in Crimea.

Russian Language

¶13. (C) Zhunko made a convincing argument for the need for greater "tolerance" by the GOU toward Crimea on the language issue. Trying to force Ukrainian on the Crimean population would have a negative result, said Zhunko, and indeed such policies already made language the go-to issue for radical, pro-Russian political parties. He noted that Ukrainian is still not widely used or socially acceptable in Crimea, and there is a lack of qualified teachers, meaning changes cannot come overnight. A transition period for schools should involve parallel classes in Russian and Ukrainian to allow choice, said Zhunko, who noted that he had tried to convince Kyiv to pursue this kind of softer policy, with only very limited success.

¶14. (C) Zhunko also argued that the GOU should create a serious state TV station for Crimea, in Russian but with a "pro-Ukrainian" position to provide objective news about

Ukraine. (Note: Most people in Crimea currently get their news from Russian TV stations. End Note.)

Crimean Tatar Issues

¶15. (C) Hrytsenko argued that there were no outstanding, serious disputes with the Crimean Tatar community. On land issues, he argued that the vast majority of returning Tatars had already received land/housing or were building housing, leaving only some 4,000 or so remaining. This was a small problem that could easily be resolved once and for all, Hrytsenko said, by using a register of deported Tatars to identify those who have not received land/housing, and then have the relevant local city council allocate land. Hrytsenko also noted that some Tatars had illegally seized some property, and the government had to oppose such actions regardless of their motivation.

¶16. (C) Jemilev and Chubarov gave a much more pessimistic view, lamenting that no real progress had been made in recent years on issues of importance to Tatars. Jemilev noted that the Georgia crisis had polarized the situation, with the Tatars the only force in Crimea condemning Russia's actions (ref A). Regarding land restitution, they complained that corruption throughout the entire land issuance process meant that local officials were giving land to themselves but denying the legitimate claims of Tatars, or forcing Tatar applicants to accept land in a less desirable area. They called for a publicly available register of all land in Crimea but claimed that Hrytsenko and other Crimean

politicians opposed such a register because they themselves were the largest beneficiaries of the corrupt land deals.

¶17. (C) Jemilev and Chubarov lamented problems surrounding the construction of a new mosque in Simferopol. Although land had already been properly allocated, court cases now prevented construction from going forward, with powerful businessmen and politicians hoping to claim the valuable land for themselves. They also described the Tatar community's anger that pro-Russian, "paramilitary" Cossack groups were allowed to operate, claiming that such groups were guilty for the recent desecration of two Crimean Tatar cemeteries. Jemilev suggested that the Tatars might consider forming their own paramilitary group to counter the Cossacks, although he noted that he appreciated the potential consequences of such a move.

Development Priorities -- Infrastructure

¶18. (SBU) All political leaders seemed to agree that improving basic infrastructure - particularly water/gas supply for citizens - was critical for Crimea's economic development. The Ambassador asked about the status of the Kerch bridge to connect Crimea with Russia. Hrytsenko and Plakida said the bridge would dramatically increase travel to Crimea from Russia, and help bolster Crimea's potential as a major trading route. The MFA, however, was blocking the project until the border with Russia was fully demarcated. The project would be expensive, with an expected price tag of USD 480 million. A second major road project was a new Simferopol-Yalta highway, which would involve a series of tunnels through the mountains and cut down the trip from about 90 minutes to 30 minutes. That project would be even more expensive, costing several billion dollars. Both projects, said Hrytsenko, required the adoption of enabling legislation by the Verkhovna Rada.

Expanding USG Presence in Crimea

¶19. (SBU) Although the investment forum did not result in any immediate new U.S. investment in Crimea, the Ambassador's visit proved a useful opportunity to expand our visibility there. Crimean political leaders welcomed the opportunity for dialogue with the Embassy, despite the relatively more anti-American attitudes of the Crimean population. We will continue to look for ways to expand this dialogue in the future.

TAYLOR